

SAFETY

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ee” and that Massey lawyers argued that “the negligence of a rank-and-file employee cannot be imputed to” the mine operator.

‘Resource constraints’

Five years before the Twilight accident, then-MSHA chief Davitt McAteer had tried various ways to get cameras on large strip-mine equipment.

First, McAteer asked mine operators to voluntarily install them. Then, he announced that MSHA was considering a rule to require them. Agency officials published a notice and asked for comments from the industry, coal miners and the public.

After George W. Bush took office in January 2001, MSHA dropped the idea. Agency officials cited “resource constraints and changing safety and health regulatory priorities.”

In West Virginia, state officials drafted their own rule to require cameras on strip mine trucks.

The original proposal, published in October 2004, would have required cameras on all trucks with payloads larger than 100 tons. Both front and rear cameras would have to come on automatically when the trucks were shifted to those gears.

Coal operators objected.

Anthony Bumbico, corporate safety director for Arch Coal, urged a “more flexible” approach where coal companies could come up with mine-specific blind spot safety plans.

In written comments, Bumbico said it would cost \$200,000 to buy cameras for Arch Coal’s fleet of 84 trucks. Also, the company would lose \$500,000 in production while the cameras were installed.

“You’re taking the truck that’s in productivity and you’re taking it out of production, at least half a shift,” said Chris Hamilton, vice president of the West Virginia Coal Association.

At first, state officials scaled back their proposal, so that fewer trucks would need cameras.

Then, in April 2005, members of the state Board of Coal Mine Health and Safety rejected the rule. Among those voting against it was Doug Conaway, then-director of the state Office of Miners Health, Safety and Training. Under state law, Conaway, who later took a job with Arch Coal, was not supposed to have a vote.

The next day, board members backed off rejecting the rule. But board members took no action to approve it.

So in July 2005, the United Mine Workers threatened to sue the board over Conaway’s improper vote.

Two months later, board members approved a camera rule. It applies only the very largest trucks — those with payloads of 230 tons — and requires cameras only on the rear of trucks.

‘It’s been really hard on the boys’

The day before the accident, Tamara Sheets was watching her sons run in a cross-country meet.

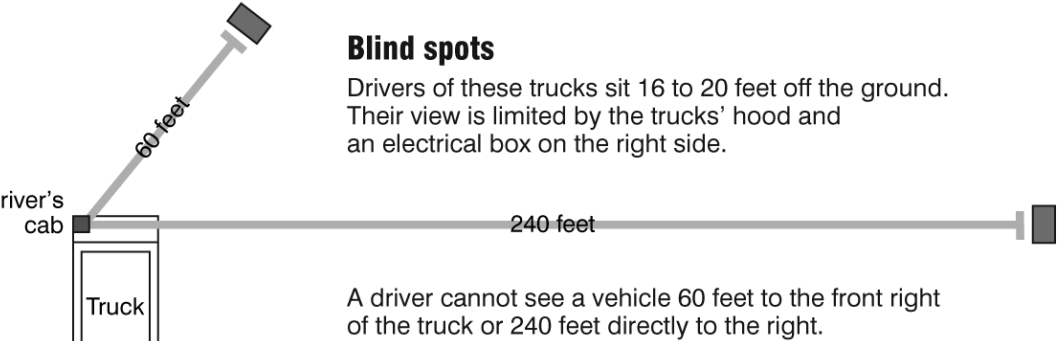
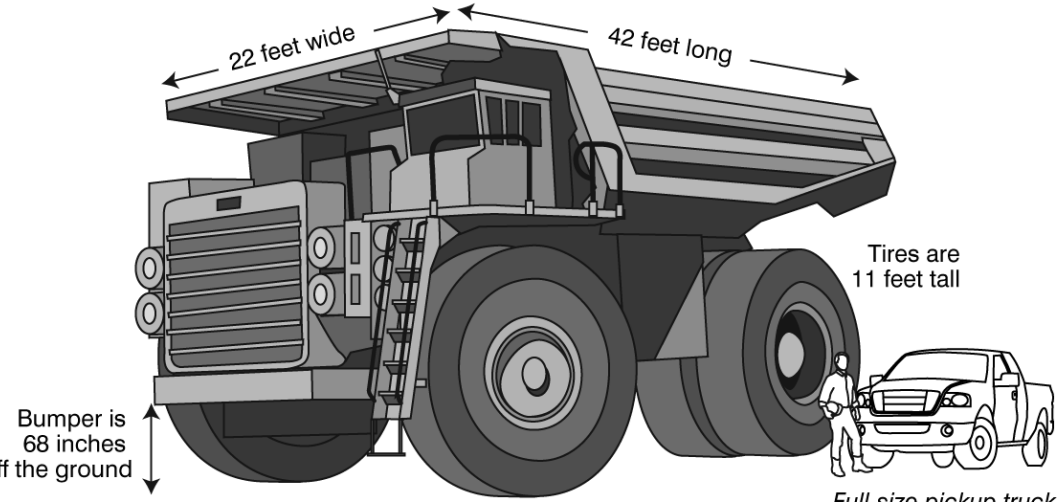
Her cell phone rang. It was her surgeon, with bad news. She had breast cancer, and would need a lumpectomy, chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

That night, Rodney told her that they would get through it. The next morning, he got up, as he always did, at 4 a.m. He left for work by 5:15.

Later that morning, rumors were flying about an accident at the mine. Workers were sent home. Other kids at Scott High

Monster trucks

The giant trucks prowling Appalachian surface mines are so large that drivers have huge blind spots where they can’t see other vehicles or miners working nearby. The Bush administration dropped plans to begin requiring these trucks to install blind-spot cameras to help avoid accidents.



Blind spots
Drivers of these trucks sit 16 to 20 feet off the ground. Their view is limited by the trucks’ hood and an electrical box on the right side.

A driver cannot see a vehicle 60 feet to the front right of the truck or 240 feet directly to the right.

BRENDA PINNELL/Sunday Gazette-Mail



Photos courtesy U.S. MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH ADMINISTRATION

On Nov. 20, 2004, miner Kevin Lupardous was crushed by a rock fall from a highwall at a Massey Energy surface mine in Boone County. Federal investigators found Massey’s mine maps showed abandoned workings “along the entire length of the highwall,” but that the company had not taken adequate steps to stabilize the area.

School were gossiping about it. A neighbor told Tamara Sheets it was Rodney.

Today, Sheets’ sons, Jason and Josh, are students at West Virginia University. Jason wants to be a doctor; Josh might go to law school.

“It’s been really hard on the boys,” Tamara Sheets said. “My husband and my sons were best friends. They were very close.”

About two years after Sheets was killed, there was another rock truck accident at the Twilight mine.

On Sept. 30, 2005, one of the huge trucks ran over a mine contract firm’s Chevy Suburban. Tamara’s nephew, Michael, was one of three passengers who were hurt. It took rescuers an hour to pry him out of the Suburban.

“He told me all he could think about was Rodney,” Tamara Sheets said.

To contact staff writer Ken Ward Jr., call 348-1702.



On Feb. 1, 2006, bulldozer operator Paul Moss was killed when his dozer hit a natural gas line at Massey Energy’s Black Castle strip mine in Boone County. Federal investigators found that Massey management had directed Moss to work in the area of a known gas line without locating the line and marking it.



Photo courtesy U.S. MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH ADMINISTRATION

Truck driver James G. Williams died when his coal-haul truck ran off a bridge at Perry County Coal in April 2003. Williams was one of a series of strip mine workers who died when the brakes on their trucks failed.

Bad truck brakes helped cause 14 deaths in decade

By Ken Ward Jr.
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HAZARD, Ky. — It was not quite 10 a.m. yet on April 4, 2003. Truck driver James G. Williams had already hauled four loads of coal from Perry County Coal’s Big Branch deep mine to the company’s preparation plant.

On his way down a hill to the mine, Williams lost control of his truck. As it rounded a turn, the truck hit a guardrail just before a bridge. It rolled off the right side of the bridge and landed on the railroad tracks below.

Williams was pronounced dead at the scene from “multiple crushing injuries,” according to a U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration report.

Later, MSHA investigators found that Williams had worked until 2 a.m. the previous evening, before starting back again for a 7 a.m. shift. They blamed the accident on Williams’ inexperience, fatigue and a “possible inattentive driver and failure to maintain control of the vehicle.”

But MSHA investigators also found another problem: The brakes on Williams’ truck didn’t work.

The right front brake of his truck was inoperative, and the others were not properly adjusted, MSHA said in its report.

It’s not a new story. In 14 strip-mine deaths over the last decade, MSHA investigators found that poorly maintained brakes played a role.

Some examples:

▲ On May 22, 1998, truck driver Robert C. Cooper was hauling 30 tons of coal at Lodestar Energy’s Shop Branch No. 2 Mine in Floyd County, Ky. Cooper tried to downshift while going down a hill. The brakes didn’t work. The truck went through a drainage ditch and up a bank.

Cooper tried to jump from the runaway truck, and was crushed between the overturning truck and the road.

Investigators found not only did the brakes not work, but the truck’s 30-ton load was 2½ times its safe capacity. Lodestar paid \$20,000 in fines.

▲ On June 28, 1999, Roy E. Whitt went to work as a contract truck driver at Cannelton Industries Inc.’s Lady Dunn Preparation Plant in eastern Kanawha County.

After rounding an S-curve near a steep grade, Whitt lost control of the truck. Whitt jumped or was thrown from the vehicle.

Investigators found it was Whitt’s first day on the job, and his second trip down the mountain in his truck.

MSHA inspectors concluded that Whitt “was not familiar with the vehicle and did not receive task training on the vehicle he was operating.” Also, MSHA officials found, the brakes on the truck did not work.

The company has paid \$10,500 of the \$230,000 in fines originally assessed. MSHA officials have written off the rest as uncollectible.

▲ At about 2 p.m. on Dec. 6, 2005, 64-year-old Robert Chattin was driving an 85-ton rock truck down a grade into a pit at Reading Anthracite’s Wadesville P33 Mine in Schuylkill County, Pa.

Chattin lost control of the truck, and couldn’t make a hard right turn at the bottom of the haulroad. The truck ran out of control for 330 feet before it overturned.

The truck’s brakes didn’t work, investigators found. Mine managers did not do a pre-shift check of the truck to ensure it was safe, investigators said.

MSHA has not yet set the fines for Reading Anthracite, records show.

▲ On May 23, 2006, 23-year-old truck driver Steven Bryant lost control of a water truck while going down a steep mine access road at Miller Brothers Coal’s Risner Branch No. 1 Mine in Breathitt County, Ky. Near the bottom of the mountain, it overturned and slid over an embankment into a field.

Investigators found the truck’s brakes didn’t work, and that Bryant was not properly trained by mine managers. No fines have been assessed yet.

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Ward

How we did this series

When an explosion ripped through the Sago Mine on Jan. 2, killing 12 workers, coal mine safety again became a national issue. The Sunday Gazette-Mail wanted to take a broader look, to examine the daily dangers faced by the nation’s coal miners. Reporter Ken Ward Jr. had recently received a six-month fellowship from the Alicia Patterson Foundation, and narrowed the focus of his work to a project on coal mine safety.

Since April, Ward has traveled the coalfields of West Virginia and visited mining areas of Alabama, Kentucky and Pennsylvania, conducting more than 100 interviews with coal miners, mine

inspectors, mine safety experts, government inspectors and elected officials. Ward has filed more than two dozen public records requests, and analyzed numerous government computer databases that detail mine safety inspections and enforcement. Also, Ward examined federal investigation reports concerning the deaths of 320 miners over the last decade, and built his own database to study the findings. Ward also reviewed federal investigation reports from more than two dozen major coal-mining disasters dating back to 1970, and studied dozens of technical papers about mine safety issues.

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On the Web

Previous stories in the series are available online at <http://wvgazette.com/section/Series/Beyond+Sago>, and the Gazette-Mail’s coverage of the Sago Mine disaster is archived at <http://wvgazette.com/section/Series/The+Sago%3CBBR%3EMine+Disaster>.

Near-miss coal mine accidents on the rise

By Ken Ward Jr.
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In the two decades before the Sago Mine disaster, the rate of major coal-mine accidents more than doubled, according to new research by a West Virginia University mining engineer. “This growing problem is largely unrecognized,” Danrick W. Alexander, a mining engineer who teaches at WVU, wrote in a doctoral dissertation published earlier this year. Between 1987 and 2001, the annual rate of coal-mine “catastrophes” — major fires, explosions or floods that could easily claim miners’ lives — doubled, according to Alexander. Since 2001, he found that the rate increased another 50 percent.

Disasters at the Sago Mine and the Kentucky Darby Mine, along with the fire at the Aracoma Mine, have drawn new attention to mine safety problems across the coalfields. This is the first time in more than two decades that the coal industry has had two disasters in the same year. The U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration defines a mine disaster as any single accident that kills five or more workers. In his research, Alexander examined mine catastrophes, a term experts define as accidents “in which many lives are lost or much property is damaged, as by a fire, explosion, in rush of water, etc.” Alexander further narrowed

his definition to include only accidents that cause an “unplanned, significant interruption of production that may result in the temporary or permanent sealing of all or part of an operating underground coal mine.” A catastrophe could be an explosion, a fire or a mine flood. There might have been no injuries. All of the miners got out alive. But things could have easily gone the other way — if breathing devices failed, or ventilation walls were missing or rescue crews didn’t get moving fast enough. Since the federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act was passed in 1969, the number of disasters per year has dropped by two-thirds and the severity of those disasters was reduced by

31 percent, Alexander explained. However, the number of operating mines also dropped, “resulting in no change in the frequency of disasters per operating mine over the last 35 years,” Alexander wrote. In his study, Alexander developed his own statistic to measure the rate of mine catastrophes. He calculated the number of catastrophes per 1,000 mine operating years, to take into account the reduced number of mines and miners. Between 1987 and 2001, he found, the number of catastrophes per 1,000 mine operating years increased from 0.77 to 1.65. “We’ve got fewer miners and fewer workers, and had fewer catastrophes,” Alexander said dur-

ing a November interview. “But we’re not really doing any better.” Alexander wanted to study the costs to mine operators caused by disasters and catastrophes. If such costs could be better quantified, he believed, it would help push the industry to continue making mines safer. “Most businesses respond to things when it affects the financial capability of the company,” Alexander said. “That’s what companies are set up to do. “Business processes respond to business data,” he said. Within the coal industry, companies internalize many of the costs of injuries and deaths. They pay workers’ compensation premiums or buy other insurance. Keeping injuries down keeps those costs down.

Mining companies also lose money when production is halted or property is damaged by a fire or explosion. But because these incidents don’t happen very often, individual companies do not always have good information to understand the potential — or actual — costs. Alexander studied 18 mine catastrophes between 1987 and 2001. He found that the accidents cost operators between \$5 million and \$45 million per event. Alexander commented that these costs are “very expensive” and should be “useful to encourage additional expenditure for prevention and mitigation.” To contact staff writer Ken Ward Jr., use e-mail or call 348-1702.